



Planning a Guided Walk

Interpretive walks offer an opportunity to explore a garden with a group of people, to get people excited, to share knowledge and make new discoveries. They can be a dynamic and rewarding form of interpretation which provides people with a memorable and enjoyable experience.

As discussed before (Chapter 1), good interpretation is enjoyable, relevant to people's experience, well-organised and has a theme. Interpretive walks are no exception. They require careful planning and preparation.

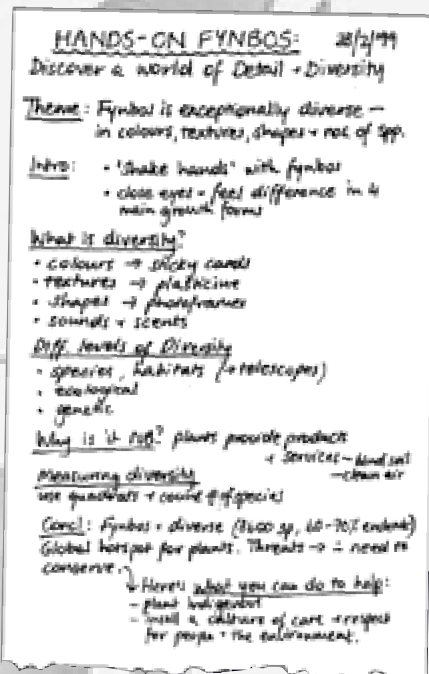
Planning the walk

Planning an interpretive walk takes time. If you haven't done it before, it may take many hours but the result is well worth it: you will have designed a walk which is engaging, entertaining, and which communicates a clear message (theme) to the group. Planning involves the following steps:

- Familiarise yourself with the garden or trail.
- Decide on a theme, and think about its relevance to your visitors (how you're going to make it connect to their personal experience).
- Select stops in the garden which will support your theme.
- Think of appropriate activities and questions to engage people along the way.

An interpretive walk should involve the group as much as possible. Any person, adult or child, likes to think that his or her opinion is important. Capitalise on this by asking questions and inviting their input. People learn most effectively when they can actively engage with new information and concepts. Giving people the opportunity to discuss new concepts in their own words helps them to understand and remember what they've learnt.

Creating a plan for your walk provides a framework which allows you to be spontaneous and responsive to the group without losing the theme.



It is useful to have a small pocket-sized summary of your plan which you can refer to during your interpretive walk.

We remember:

10% of what we read,
20% of what we hear,
30% of what we see, and
70–90% of what we
experience.

People remember what they
participate in.

What does this imply for
interpretation?

Tips for interpretive guides

- Arrive 10 minutes before the walk starts and use this time to get to know your group. Greet new people as they arrive and introduce yourself to establish a rapport. Assess the group (are they locals/foreigners?, what level is their interest? and fitness? etc.) and pitch your walk accordingly.
- Start with an introduction. Create interest in the subject of the walk and introduce the theme. Tell them briefly what you're going to do (i.e. how your walk will be organised). Give the length and duration of the walk and where it will end.
- Stop at various points of interest to develop your theme. Be flexible: make use of visitors' spontaneous interests or questions. Encourage group participation.
- End off your walk with a conclusion. Make the connection one last time between the theme and what the group saw and experienced.

Making walks more interactive and fun

If an interpretive guide is doing all the talking during a walk, the chances are that he/she will lose people's interest along the way. This is because it is extremely difficult to listen to someone and concentrate if you're not actively involved in some way. Asking questions, passing around objects and doing activities are just some of the ways in which you can engage people and hold their attention.

Here the guide is showing visitors a leaf of the bitter aloe which she has cut in half. When everyone had seen the outer yellow sap and inner gel, she talked about the medicinal value of each part.



Visitor safety and indemnity

- Be very careful when allowing visitors to taste or touch a plant product. Make sure that it is a commonly used plant and that there are no known side effects.
- Do not allow visitors to handle poisonous plant products.
- If you are going to include such activities, it is advisable to ask visitors to sign an indemnity form at the start of the walk.

Using objects to show-and-tell

A rucksack or a money belt is useful for carrying objects such as plant products (tools, medicines, instruments, food), wood samples, fossils or seedpods. Allow some time for people to look, touch or smell the object and pass it around the group. Invite people to share their observations. Avoid talking while objects are circulating because people will not be able to give you their full attention.

Asking questions

Asking good questions can make a guided walk more dynamic and interesting. Remember to use open-ended questions (e.g. what could this be used for? why do you think this looks like this?). These have many different possible responses, so they encourage your group to be creative and make suggestions. Avoid using closed questions (e.g. what is this called?) because they can be intimidating and make your audience feel ignorant.

For further guidelines about asking questions, see Box 7 on page 59.

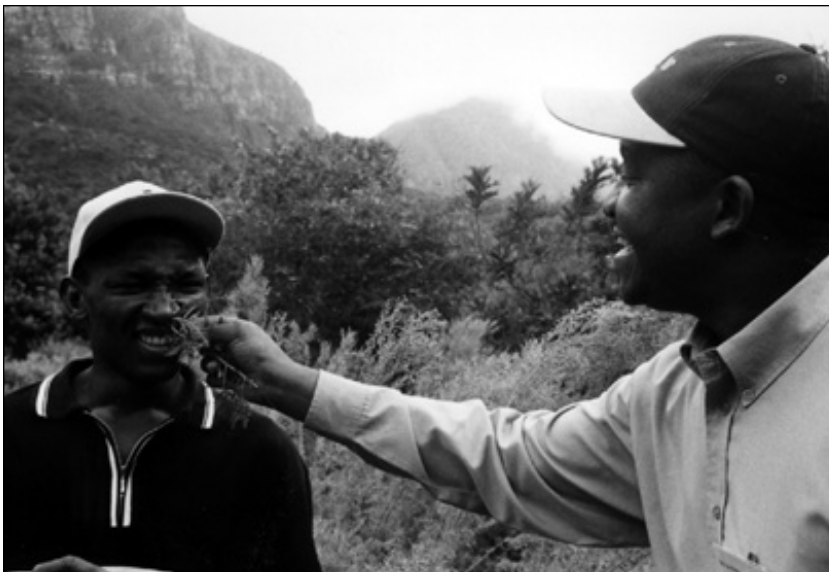
Doing activities

The best way to engage people is to incorporate some short activities in the tour. These can be done as a group or in pairs.

Sensory activities can create a memorable link between a person and a place they've visited. No one who has tasted pepper bark will ever forget it! You can invite people to smell, taste and touch things, and ask them to describe what they experience.

Alternatively you could do a listening exercise: ask

people to close their eyes and see how many different sounds they can hear in about 2-3 minutes. You'll be surprised how many natural and mechanical sounds there are in a botanical garden!



Evaluating walks

Doing interpretive walks is a particularly rewarding form of interpretation because you get immediate feedback from the group. When people are looking attentive and interested and have a 'sparkle in their eyes', you know that they're having a good time. On the other hand if they're yawning, looking away, or have a glazed expression on their faces, you are probably losing their attention and need to react fast!

Perhaps a word of caution is necessary here. If you act like an 'expert' and give an hour's worth of facts and figures without engaging with the group, your group may look interested. This is because people are easily impressed by knowledge, but it is doubtful that they'll be able to remember much. You need to ask yourself whether your walk has achieved its goal of making the garden come alive.

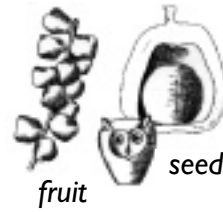
One way to avoid the above situation is to think of the people in your group as potential interpreters. It is your role to facilitate an experience where everyone has something to contribute. You can do this by asking open-ended questions and encouraging people to share their observations. In this way you'll be learning new things all the time (from the group) which makes every interpretive walk an exciting and unique experience.



Engaging with Visitors

Here are three different ways of interpreting the same plant. If you were the visitor, which interaction would you prefer. Why?

VISITOR: What's this?
 GUIDE: The seed of *Hyphaene coriacea*
 VISITOR: Oh.



VISITOR: What's this?
 GUIDE: The seed of the Lala palm, the plant growing here to our left.
 VISITOR: Oh.
 GUIDE: The Lala palm is common in the subtropical and tropical parts of Africa. The leaves are used for weaving baskets.



VISITOR: Hmm.
 GUIDE: Local people tap sap from the growing tip of the palm for making wine.
 VISITOR: Oh really? I wonder how . . . ?
 GUIDE: The seeds are used for decorative carving. It's known as vegetable ivory.
 VISITOR: Oh.

VISITOR: What's this?
 GUIDE: It's the seed of the Lala palm, the plant growing here to our left. Let me show you something. (*Guide takes out a knife and removes some of the outer seed coat to expose hard white interior*) Go ahead – feel it and pass it around.
 VISITOR: Wow – it's so hard! And white – it almost looks like ivory.
 GUIDE: Exactly. It's known as vegetable ivory and is used for decorative carving. Actually the Lala palm has another more intoxicating use. Any ideas?
 VISITOR: Something alcoholic, I guess . . .
 GUIDE: That's right. It's used for making palm wine. Local people tap the sap from near the growing tip, and ferment it to make a strong brew. I had a few sips of it once – it's strong stuff.
 VISITOR: Gee – where did you taste it?
 GUIDE: In Maputoland. The Lala palm is quite common along the eastern coastal areas of tropical Africa, so you'll find palm wine throughout this area.

A BAG OF TRICKS

Props and activities to make your walks more interactive and fun



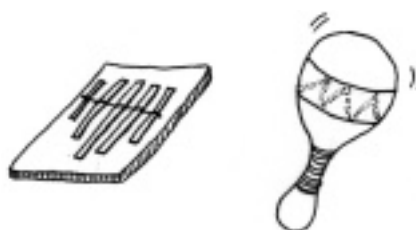
Photo frames— these simple cardboard frames enable you to select an object or view. This helps to focus the attention on detail and design.

Coloured arrows can be used to draw attention to something, without having to physically point at it. This creates space for people in the group to look at the object of interest, while you're talking and giving the explanation.

Cardboard rolls (e.g. toilet rolls) can be used as telescopes. They are a good focussing tool for far-away subjects.



Musical instruments such as flutes, shakers or thumb pianos can be played to invoke a specific mood or atmosphere.



Balls of plasticine enable you to sample the diversity of textures found in nature. Press the plasticine flat against a leaf, bark or rock, lift it off and see what impression it leaves.



A magnifying glass enables you to look at things more closely, and often reveals surprising details!



A sticky card is simply a small piece of cardboard with a piece of double-sided tape attached. It can be used to stick on small pieces of leaf, bark or a flower.

Guided walks with John

Guided walks in the botanical garden where I work have always been exciting and interesting. This is because each walk is different. Even if the **theme** of two walks is the same, there will always be different people in your group and therefore new ways of seeing and discovering nature.

I like to get the groups I work with involved right from the start. We will often begin a walk with the theme 'plants have many uses' by digging in the ground for a piece of root with some medicinal value. This immediately attracts interest, and they can smell the root once I have dug it up. I then ask what they think it smells like, and whether the smell reminds them of something.

I always try to involve people's senses. It makes them really interested in what we're looking at. One can say that a certain leaf feels like a piece of leather, but until you feel it, the connection is not really made.

I often use 'sticky cards' to collect things that relate to the theme of the walk. For example, for a walk with the theme 'forests are full of action', I would encourage the group to use the palettes to tell a story that demonstrates some of the activity that is happening in the forest. People might collect dead leaves in various stages of decay, and tell the story of decomposition, or collect seeds and fruit and soil and tell the story of new life starting in the ground. This is effective because it keeps the walk focused on the theme, yet allows participants to give their own opinions on what is happening in the forest.

A popular walk that I do is a **night walk** in the garden. Participants arrive with torches, and we explore the garden looking for animals, insects and night-flowering plants. The theme for this walk is 'The garden comes alive at night', and we look for things that demonstrate this fact. Some time of silent sitting among trees is most enjoyable at night, but it is really important that the group trusts you. So many visitors have never really looked at things we as interpreters take for granted. The night walk provides an excellent opportunity to share the garden with them, and many visitors find this an unforgettable experience.

I encourage you to get to know your garden well, and enjoy sharing it and the wonders it contains with all who visit. I find the personal interaction that a walk allows cannot be bettered by any other form of interpretation. Enjoy yourself!

John Roff – Interpretive Officer, Natal NBG.

